Joan E. Taylor (ed.), *Jesus and Brian: Exploring the Historical Jesus and his Times via* Monty Python's Life of Brian, London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2015

The genesis of this delightful edited collection was a conference staged at King's College London in June 2014 on how we can learn about the historical Jesus via the controversial Monty Python movie *Life of Brian* (1979). The book, which has been published with great speed barely a year on from the conference, is something of a labour of love for its editor Joan E. Taylor and the other contributors who managed to procure the involvement of two of the original Pythons, John Cleese and Terry Jones, to talk about the influence and reception of the film some 35 years on from its initial (not altogether positive) impact. That impact was typified by the now infamous TV showdown between two of the Pythons and the reactionary presence of Malcolm Muggeridge and Bishop of Southwark Mervyn Stockwood, the shadow of which pervades many of the chapters in this volume (even if, as Richard Burridge pertinently points out in chapter 2, it clearly didn't rank as important enough for Stockwood himself to even refer to that seminal cultural moment in his 1982 autobiography). The tide has now turned sufficiently in the other direction to the point that Taylor is able to argue in her introduction that "In general, being offended can be a good thing", not least because it "can show us our boundaries, and what we care about deeply" (xxvi), and, according to Helen Bond, the film invites us to ask whether "the Cross, and the suffering and death associated with it" is "really above all forms of satire and parody" (113). Many of the chapters are a testimony to how far the boundaries have shifted as when William Telford goes so far as to ask whether Brian should be considered a Christ-figure who "throws light, however facetiously, on the process whereby we construct our Christs" (17), and according to James Crossley the film might legitimately "be categorized as part of the quest for the historical Jesus" (69). For David Tollerton, *Life of Brian* is even "reminiscent of many a biblical text, and the Gospel of Brian, it turns out, has got just as many fissures running across it as the canonical synoptic ones" (60). Whereas the reaction of many back in 1979 was to ban the film, Tollerton persuasively makes the case for re-framing the way we conceptualize the nature of the sacred such that in an age where for society at large it is "individualism and the authority of the self" that best captures the meaning and location of the sacred then "blasphemy is anything that violates the sanctity of individual freedoms" (65). Since censorship is "the suppression of an individual's right to make up their own mind" then, today, "to blaspheme you do not do so by screening or praising *Life of Brian*, but by banning it" (65). Not all of the contributors give the film a wholesale endorsement. Amy-Jill Levine, for example, is concerned at how "stereotypes of femininity and sexuality are reinforced rather than undermined" (168), to the extent that "*Life of Brian* is an opportunity missed" (169). Plenty of the contributors are, though, happy to use the film as an opportunity to reflect on the way in which the movie has challenged the way in which they do their research, with Philip Davies, who pioneered the use of *Life of Brian* in biblical studies, opting to "look at scholarship from the direction of the film" (83) instead of the customary other way around, to the point of asking not whether Brian resembles Jesus at all but whether Jesus might be construed as a "Brian-like figure" (88) – assuming that is, Davies is prepared to ask, we can "be sure that there *was* a Jesus" (88) in the first place. This is of course all far removed from the world of 1979 when, as Burridge attests, "instead of seizing [the] opportunity to discuss the real significance of Jesus, Malcolm Muggeridge and the Bishop of Southwark indulged in precisely the abuse of power by the establishment that Michael Palin wanted to debate" (41). It may not have felt that way 35 years ago but maybe Bart Ehrman is not wide of the mark in his attestation that "Sometimes shocked discomfiture can be a very good thing indeed" (150).

Christopher Deacy

University of Kent, December 2015